

U.S. RADIUM CORPORATION,  
PAINT APPLICATION BUILDING  
422 Alden Street  
Orange  
Essex County  
New Jersey

HAER No. NJ-121-A

HAER  
NJ  
7-ORA,  
3A-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
Northeast Region  
Philadelphia Support Office  
U.S. Custom House  
200 Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, P.A. 19106

## HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

### U.S. RADIUM CORPORATION, PAINT APPLICATION BUILDING

HAER  
NJ  
7-ORA,  
3A-  
HAER NO. NJ-121-A

Location:

422 Alden Street  
Orange  
Essex County, New Jersey

USGS Orange, New Jersey Quadrangle,  
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:  
18.565059.4515451

Dates of Construction:

1917

Engineer/Architect:

Unknown

Present Use:

Vacant

Present Owner:

City of Orange, New Jersey

Significance: The U.S. Radium Corporation site, including the structural components of the paint application building, dating to the period 1917-1926, were associated with nationally significant developments in health and safety standards, the ability of woman reformers to secure protection for workers handling radioactive materials, and tools used to detect and measure radio-isotopes. Beginning in 1920, radium dial painters at the plant began reporting health problems later associated with radium exposure and many died over the next decade. There were no publicly recognized health or safety problems identified or standards established for handling radioactive materials at this time. The dead woman, and others who survived, became the first known victims of industrial radium poisoning. The survivors subsequent efforts to seek redress, in alliance with the Consumer's League, played a major role in the establishment of legislative protection for workers against industrial diseases. Equally important, scientific investigation of these dial painters, and of other victims of radium poisoning, led to the establishment of health standards used to protect workers in radioactive environments and to the emergence of human radiobiology as a field of study. These investigations had military as well as civilian implications. Even before official standards of workplace radiation exposure were established after World War II, data from dial painters' cases were a major source in the health and safety codes developed for the wartime Manhattan Project. The paint application building is a contributory element to the historical significance of the U.S. Radium site.

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**Project Information:** The site is a Federal Superfund site and will undergo clean-up to remove radiological contamination. A previously conducted cultural resources investigation (Grossman and Associates 1997) determined that the site was significant and eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The former paint application building is one of two remaining structures on the site associated with its period of significance (1917-1926) and will be demolished as result of clean-up activities. To mitigate the adverse effect, the New Jersey State Historic Preservation Office stipulated documentation of the structures. Due to human health concerns arising from elevated levels of radiological contamination within the buildings, USEPA determined that restricted access to the buildings' interior area was advisable and preferred. Therefore, only limited interior photographic documentation, in addition to exterior photographic documentation, was conducted to fulfill the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office's stipulation. At the direction of the USEPA, the historical narrative for this documentation was redacted from the 1997 Grossman and Associates report.

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New York, New York 10024

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## **PART I - HISTORICAL NARRATIVE**

### **PAINT APPLICATION BUILDING AND THE U.S. RADIUM CORPORATION SITE - NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION**

This narrative history provides information on the paint application building (no. 422 Alden Street), part of the 2.2 acre U.S. Radium Corporation site, located in Orange, Essex County, New Jersey. Activities occurring at the site between 1917 and 1926, including those transpiring within the paint application building, and the subsequent consequences of those activities, are significant events in the history of worker health and safety issues in the United States.

The paint application building is part of a HAER complex (the U.S. Radium Corporation site - see HAER No. NJ-121). The complex also includes the radium crystallization laboratory (see HAER No. NJ-121-B).

The U.S. Radium Corporation site is bounded on the east by High Street, on the north by Alden Street, on the south by the former alignment of the Erie Railroad's Orange Branch -from which tracks have been removed - and Wigwam Brook which currently flows in a concrete channel, and on the west by private residences. The paint application building, fronting on Alden Street to the north, is located towards the center of the site.

Between 1917 and 1926 (referred to here as the U.S. Radium Period), the primary activity at the site by the U.S. Radium Corporation (known until 1921 as the Radium Luminous Materials Corporation) was the extraction and purification of radium from carnotite ore to produce luminous paints and other radium products for military, commercial, and medical purposes. During the facility's operation, radium was extracted from carnotite ore containing two to four percent uranium oxide. A large amount of process wastes and tailings containing radioactive elements were temporarily discarded on unused areas of the main facility, and much of it was ultimately disposed of off site. Some was used apparently to fill portions of the site, causing most of the radiological contamination on the property, and some buildings were constructed directly over the waste material. At the time of operation, the facility consisted of ten buildings. Only two of these structures remain as of May, 1999. One is the former paint application building and the other is the former radium crystallization laboratory (428 Alden Street). They were used commercially until the early 1980's and are now vacant. Portions of the buildings are radiologically contaminated as a result of the U.S. Radium Period activities that occurred within them.

The paint application building is a plain, concrete-block structure with simple rectangular plans, low gable roofs, and tile-capped parapets. The two-story former paint application building fronts directly on Alden Street to the north and on the west is separated from the one-story

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former radium crystallization laboratory (the other surviving U.S. Radium Period structure) by only about three feet. Both structures were built in 1917 in the northwest section of Orange, New Jersey, in a neighborhood of late 19th century worker housing, commercial buildings, and hat factories. Much of this neighborhood remains intact with many modifications, including the row of two-story homes on the north side of Alden Street opposite the property. The lot immediately west of the buildings has been razed. East of the paint application building, on a lot formerly part of the facility and used for radium extraction and refining, are four small one-story concrete block structures built since 1939 for a gas station, automobile body shop, and a number of small commercial operations. The rear of the facility was formerly open and used for storage and shipping purposes.

Between 1926 and the late 1930's, U.S. Radium demolished most of its Orange facility, leaving the two surviving structures, a boiler house, and several small ancillary buildings. The boiler house and ancillary buildings were subsequently removed from the site.

The paint application building is substantially intact structurally and retains its original form and location but has been altered by later additions, removal of all original equipment and most original fixtures, removal of some original interior partitions and exterior walls, and replacement or blocking of windows, skylights, or doors.

### **PAINT APPLICATION BUILDING**

Insurance maps, historic views, written accounts, and accounts obtained from informants on the dial painting operations indicate that watch dial or other instrument painting was done in a two-story structure. This structure, the paint application building, was divided by masonry partition walls into three major sections on each level. Accounts vary as to descriptions of the activities conducted in these six sections, and no drawings of interior arrangements have been found in the documentary sources reviewed. On the first floor, the north end apparently housed executive offices, the central section included a machine shop and an area used to make paint applicators (probably for sale off-site), and the rear or southern section was used for shipping and, presumably, receiving. Accounts agree that the central section of the second floor was a well-lit area used for dial painting. The north section of the second floor was used for office and/or dial painting space. The south section of this floor at one time contained a scale room and dark room, but may also have been used for painting during peak production periods. Dial painting areas had four parallel rows of work benches, aligned with the building's longer axis. Both floors included large wooden, double-hung, triple windows, and at least one section of the upper floor appears to have skylights in some historic views. With the exception of the building's heating unit, housed in a small one-story concrete block room at the rear of the structure, virtually all equipment used here was probably easily portable and required no substantial bases or foundations; any machine tools used were probably small general-purpose drills, lathes, or

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grinders (Sanborn 1939; Eng 1980; ANL n.d.a).

The original two-story structure is 35 by 125 feet in size, with one-foot thick mortared concrete block bearing walls approximately 26 feet high. It is situated on a reinforced concrete slab resting on undocumented footings. The end walls continue above the roofline to form tile-capped flat topped parapets, with the parapet facing Alden Street embellished by a central raised section. The parapets were evidently the only components approaching the status of decorative elements on an otherwise stark, utilitarian structure. Later concrete-block additions, built ca. 1944-50, include a one-story 16 by 32-foot office structure along Alden Street east of the original building, and a two-story 65 by 57-foot factory space south of the original paint application building.

The original exterior was distinguished by a large number of 8-foot high, double-hung wooden windows, arranged in single, double, and triple configurations of 4-foot wide units. Firewall and door placements inhibited continuously symmetrical window arrangements. The long walls were dominated by triple 12-foot wide windows, installed on the upper level and west half of the south side, and the west half of the lower level on the structure's north side. On the second floor, four single windows on the north end and two triple windows on the south end reflected interior bays that are discussed below. None of the original windows survive, with those not blocked replaced by fixed metal sash with some horizontally-pivoting lights. The benefits of the large windows on the west side of the first floor's south section were vitiated by the presence of the crystallization laboratory about three feet away. This unusual siting may reflect a decision to enlarge the paint application building after the 1917 complex was designed and under construction, a possibility also suggested by roof-framing details noted below.

Original door locations are not fully documented in available maps or historic views. Window locations suggest the two doors on the east side, including one double-door opening, are in original locations. A three-foot wide door facing Alden Street was removed and replaced by a similar opening a few feet to the east. Second-story doors with exterior metal stairs appear to be in original locations, with the stairs to the northmost door moved ninety degrees when an additional office wing was built along Alden Street. The single interior wooden stairwell, immediately south of the north firewall, survives with a small closet area below the stairs.

Six steel and two brick columns at 12- to 15-foot intervals define two longitudinal bays on each floor, and support steel beams and wooden joists on which rest the second floor and gabled wood roof. The 18-inch square brick columns mark divisions of the 123-foot long interior into the three sections noted above, with the sections running about 40, 57, and 25 feet from south to north, respectively. Eight-inch thick concrete block fire walls originally ran from each brick column to the side walls, dividing the interior sections and rising above the roof line. The fire walls are partly intact, or, where removed, retain traces as vertical marks on the side walls.

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Above the concrete floor on the first level coated with a rubberized covering, the 5.5-inch diameter steel columns rise 12.3 feet and support a longitudinal 16 by 5.5-inch I-beam whose ends rest on the north and south walls. Three by three inch angle irons riveted to either side of the beam help support transverse 11.5 by 3.5-inch wooden joists on two foot centers. A double layer of badly deteriorated second-story wooden floor boards rests on the joists. Roof supports include 12.7-foot high steel columns similar in size to those on the lower level, and a 10 by 5.5-inch central I-beam with riveted 5 by 4-inch channel beams. The northern two second-story sections have 12 by 1.5-inch wooden joists on about 22 inch centers, on which 5.5-inch wide tongue-and-groove roof boards rest. The southern section has 9.5 by 2.5-inch wooden joists on 16-inch centers, supporting 5.5-inch wide roof boards butted flush without tongue-and-groove fitting. These differences in roof framing may reflect a decision to expand the building while it was under construction. In the central section most used by dial painters, there were eight 8 by 8-foot skylights. The skylights are today filled with roof boards and roofing, except for part of one now filled with a motor-driven fan vent.

The water-heating plant for the original building was housed in a one-story concrete-block room off the south side of the structure. The rear addition, built in the 1940s, absorbed and retained this room, but involved removal of original exterior wall sections and windows on both floors. Similar changes were made when the addition on Alden Street was built. Post-1936 uses of the building have also removed most traces of original manufacturing activity, including all incandescent lighting fixtures and wooden benches shown in historic views. The first floor remains relatively open, with a large collection of obsolete arcade games. On the second floor, electronic component work involved installation of some partitions, metal benches, and an elevated 6.5-foot wide central platform probably used for a conveyor system or parts storage. Radiators at some east side windows, toilet and locker rooms, and perhaps some office partitions are the only other non-structural remains of work with radium products.

Among recognized structural and architectural forms of early 20th century industrial facilities, the paint application building is somewhat unusual in its resolute absence of style and a structural system usually seen in inexpensive, auxiliary one-story buildings. The use of concrete block could reflect a wartime shortage of steel, because more steel was usually used in reinforced-concrete structures. It is possible that the Radium Luminous Materials Corporation decided to expand so much and so fast in response to wartime contracts that the most quickly-built design was chosen. Brick bearing walls would have served as well structurally, but would have taken more time to erect. The structure would reflect this decision better with original window and door arrangements. With the modifications and additions, the paint application building now appears nearly indistinguishable from the later unrelated concrete block structures which cover portions of the former U.S. Radium site.

One piece of equipment inside the building could be a remnant of radium extraction work

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performed elsewhere on the site. Located outside of the original building, near the southeast corner of the building, under a later entryway roofed with corrugated metal (a shed addition), this object is a steel cylinder about 4.5 feet long and 3 feet in diameter, designed to rotate on a cast-iron base using a large gear wheel encircling one cylinder end. Judging by its design and construction, this cylinder appears to be of early 20th century manufacture and probably served as a mixer. Inasmuch as no radium-related activities in the paint application building required such a device, one must suppose either that it was removed from the extraction building or that it post-dates radium-related work.

**NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

**Paint Application Building**

The paint application building of the U.S. Radium Corporation contains former work areas associated with nationally significant developments in health and safety standards and the ability of women reformers to secure protection for workers handling radioactive materials. Despite its compromised condition, the simple forms of the paint application building retain original dimensions and construction materials. The structure conveys the relatively spartan conditions where luminous paints were applied to watch or instrument dials. As many as 300 dial painters - all women -- worked in the paint application building at one time, primarily on the second floor with its large window areas and now-filled skylights. The radium poisoning suffered by some of these women, and their attempts to seek redress in alliance with the Consumers' League, began chains of events pertaining to issues of worker health and safety which make the property historically significant today.

The condition, proximity, and association of the paint application building with the final stage in the use of radium produced at the site make the structure historically significant. Although impacted by later industrial uses, portions of the building retain their U.S. Radium Period integrity. Accordingly, the building represents a contributory element of the U.S. Radium site's National Register eligibility because, as one of two principal surviving elements of the period of the property's historic significance (1917-1926), it adds historical associations to the complex.



## **PART II - SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

### **ORIGINAL DRAWINGS**

U.S. Radium Corporation operations are poorly documented in available drawings. The only drawings contemporary with plant operations indicated are a few sketches of one or more equipment arrangements in an unidentified structure which is probably not the paint application building (ANL n.d.b:Microfilm 7). The most detailed plan of spatial and functional facility arrangements appears in a sketch plan with notes created during a 1979 interview with an unidentified plant superintendent who worked during the early 1920's (Siebert 1979).

Another contemporary drawing of the Orange plant is a site plan prepared for inclusion in the 1926 "Factory For Sale" notice of the U.S. Radium Corporation (ANL n.d.c).

### **HISTORIC VIEWS**

A small number of photographs taken during or shortly after U.S. Radium Corporation operations at the Orange, New Jersey plant survive in archives of the Argonne National Laboratory. The five which were xerographically reproduced for inclusion in this work show the portions of the interior and exterior of the paint application building. Available finding aids for this archive do not specifically locate these views, which were obtained by Grossman and Associates 1997 during an earlier phase of this documentation. Another historic view of the front of the plant was included as part of the 1926 "Factory For Sale" notice of the U.S. Radium Corporation (ANL n.d.c).

For further information on historic views of the U.S. Radium site, as well as on other site related data, contact Dr. Carol Giometti, BioSciences Division, Argonne National Laboratory, 9700 South Cass Avenue, Argonne, Illinois 60439, Telephone #: (630) 252-2000.

### **INTERVIEWS**

Dr. Joel Grossman of Grossman and Associates (121 Essex Street, New York, New York 10002), Principal Investigator for the 1997 study from which this Historical Narrative is drawn, interviewed by telephone and correspondence Dr. R.E. Rowland, Environmental Research Division, Argonne National Laboratory, 9700 South Cass Avenue, Argonne, Illinois 60439, Telephone #: (630) 252-2000. Dr. Rowland, former director of the Center for Human Radiobiology at Argonne National Laboratory, is an expert on the effects of radium in humans and on the history of radium studies in the United States.

Dr. Joel Grossman interviewed and, for a time, worked with Dr. Claudia Clark on his 1997 study. Dr. Clark is an assistant professor at Central Michigan University. She completed her dissertation

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on the U.S. Radium Corporation (at Rutgers University) and is an expert on the industrial processes that were conducted there and on the health history of its workers.

Dr. Joel Grossman interviewed Mr. Edward Lander of the United States Geological Survey, Reston, Virginia. Mr. Lander is an expert on radium industry processes.

Dr. Claudia Clark (see Clark 1993, 1997) interviewed Dr. William Castle (Harvard Researcher investigating health conditions at the U.S. Radium plant - see Castle, Drinker, and Drinker 1925) and Florence Wall (Laboratory Assistant, U.S. Radium Corporation, Orange Facility), and others.

Patricia A. Siebert of Argonne National Laboratory conducted interviews with individuals who worked at the U.S. Radium Corporation, Orange plant during the period 1920-1925 (see Siebert 1979). Information from that interview was included in the 1997 Grossman and Associates report.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

ANL (Argonne National Laboratory)

n.d.a "LaPorte v. U.S. Radium Corporation. Excerpts from Testimony. U.S. District Court, District of New Jersey, Volume I, November 26th." In **Box 116, Argonne National Laboratory Archives, U.S. Radium Collection.**

n.d.b Microfilmed Copies of Business Records. **Argonne National Laboratory Archives, U.S. Radium Collection**

n.d.c "1926 Factory For Sale Notice for the U.S. Radium Corporation, Orange Facility." **Argonne National Laboratory Archives, U.S. Radium Collection.**

Castle, William B., Katherine Drinker, and Cecil Drinker

1925 "Necrosis of the Jaw in Workers Employed in Applying a Luminous Paint Containing Radium." **Journal of Industrial Hygiene** 7:371-382.

Clark, Claudia

1993 "Radium Poisoning Revealed: A Case Study in the History of Industrial Health Reform," **Humboldt Journal of Social Relations** 19:1.

1997 **Radium Girls; Woman and Industrial Health Reform, 1910-1935.** The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

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Eng, Jeanette

1980 "Investigation of a Former Radium Processing Site." Bureau of Radiation Protection,  
New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Trenton, New Jersey.

Essex County, New Jersey

1917 **Liber E58**, p. 570, Essex County Hall of Records, Newark, New Jersey.

Grossman and Associates

1997 **Archaeological and Historical Sensitivity Evaluation of the U.S. Radium Facility - Final Report Tasks 1, 2, 3, 4, and 9 (Subcontract No. ARCS-C-018). Contract No. 68-W9-0051. U.S. Radium Corporation, City of Orange, Essex County, New Jersey, Work Assignment No. 004-2L67.** Dr. Joel W. Grossman, Principal Investigator. Report prepared for the United States Environmental Protection Agency. Report on file at the New Jersey State Office of Historic Preservation, Trenton, New Jersey.

HAER No. NJ-121

1999 **U.S. Radium Corporation Site - Photographs, Written Historical and Descriptive Data.** Submitted to Historic American Engineering Record, National Register Programs Division, Northeast Area Office, National Park Service, Philadelphia, Pa.

HAER No. NJ-121-B

1999 **Radium Crystallization Laboratory, U.S. Radium Corporation Site - Photographs, Written Historical and Descriptive Data.** Submitted to Historic American Engineering Record, National Register Programs Division, Northeast Area Office, National Park Service, Philadelphia, Pa.

Rowland, R.E.

1994 **Radium in Humans: A Review of U.S. Studies.** Argonne National Laboratory, Argonne, Illinois.

Sanborn Map Company

1939 **Insurance Maps of Essex County, New Jersey; City of Orange.** Sanborn Insurance Company, New York, New York. Map in the Collections of the New York City Public Library, Map Division.

Siebert, Patricia A.

1979 "Intra-Laboratory Memos to CHR Record Room, Argonne National Laboratory, September 26th and October 5th, 1979." In **Box 117:7, Argonne National Laboratory Archives, U.S. Radium Collection.**

U.S.G.S. (United States Geological Survey)

1981 **Orange, New Jersey, 7.5 Minute Quadrangle Map.** United State Geological Survey,  
Reston, VA.

### **SOURCES NOT YET INVESTIGATED**

Dr. Claudia Clark's 1997 work on the radium dial painters was published after the Grossman and Associates (1997) study was completed. Clark's work is an exhaustive study on the history of radium dial painters in New Jersey, Illinois and elsewhere and their role in industrial health reform. It also contains a comprehensive bibliography on radium/dial painter related issues and locational information for relevant primary sources. Another excellent bibliography is included in Rowland (1994).

Additional documentary data identified but not included in the Grossman and Associates (1997) report, which may contain information on the paint application building or other U.S. Radium Period structures, are housed at the following repositories:

Center for Human Radiobiology, Argonne National Laboratory, Argonne, Illinois (contact: Christopher A. Reilly, Director, Environmental Research Division) -

Robley Evans Papers

Commissioner Harris (New York City Health Department) Correspondence Files

Swen Kjaer (Department of Labor investigator) Papers

Medical Files

New Jersey Department of Public Health Files on Everett Field

Radium Archives

U.S. Radium Corporation Records.

Harvard Medical School, Harvard University, Boston, Ma. -

Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine

Reference Desk, Historical Section (contact: Mr. Dick Wolf)

Archives of the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine

Industrial Hygiene Department Records

Physiology Department Records

Frederick Shattuck Papers.

University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Newark, New Jersey -

Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries (contact: Ms. Barbara Irwin and  
Ms. Lois Densky-Wolff)

Harrison Martland Papers.

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Newark Public Library, Newark, New Jersey -  
Radiation and Radium Clipping File.

New Jersey Historical Society, Newark, New Jersey -  
Women's Club of Orange Records.

Rutgers University Libraries, New Brunswick, New Jersey -  
Special Collections and University Archives  
Consumers' League of New Jersey Papers  
League of Women Voters of New Jersey Papers.

Other repositories not investigated by Grossman and Associates (1997) possibly containing architectural/engineering information on the paint application building and other U.S. Radium Period structures:

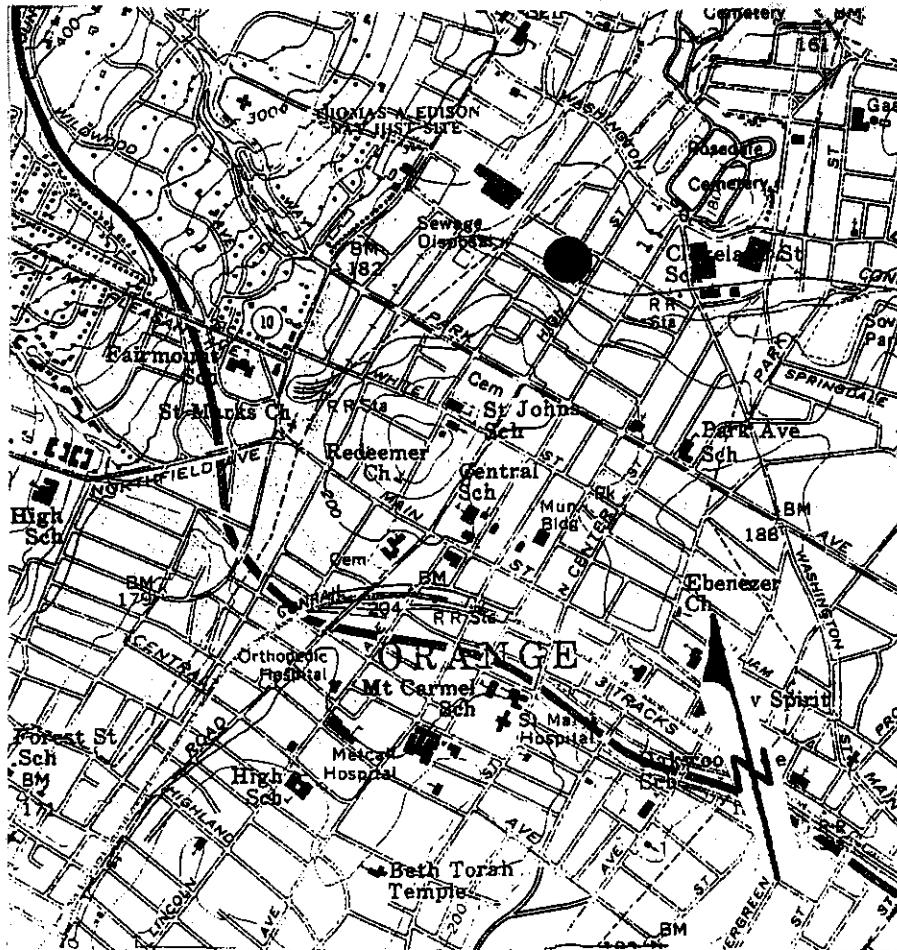
City of Orange, New Jersey,  
Department of Building Inspection and Code Enforcement  
Tax and Water Department  
Tax Collector.

Other repositories of U.S. Radium related data identified by Clark (1997) but not reviewed for the 1997 Grossman and Associates study:

Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Ma. -  
Alice Hamilton Papers  
Hamilton Family Papers.

The New York Public Library, New York, New York -  
Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division  
Florence Kelley Papers.

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**U.S. Radium Corporation Site  
Base Map Source: United States Geological Survey 1981  
Scale of Original: 1:24,000**




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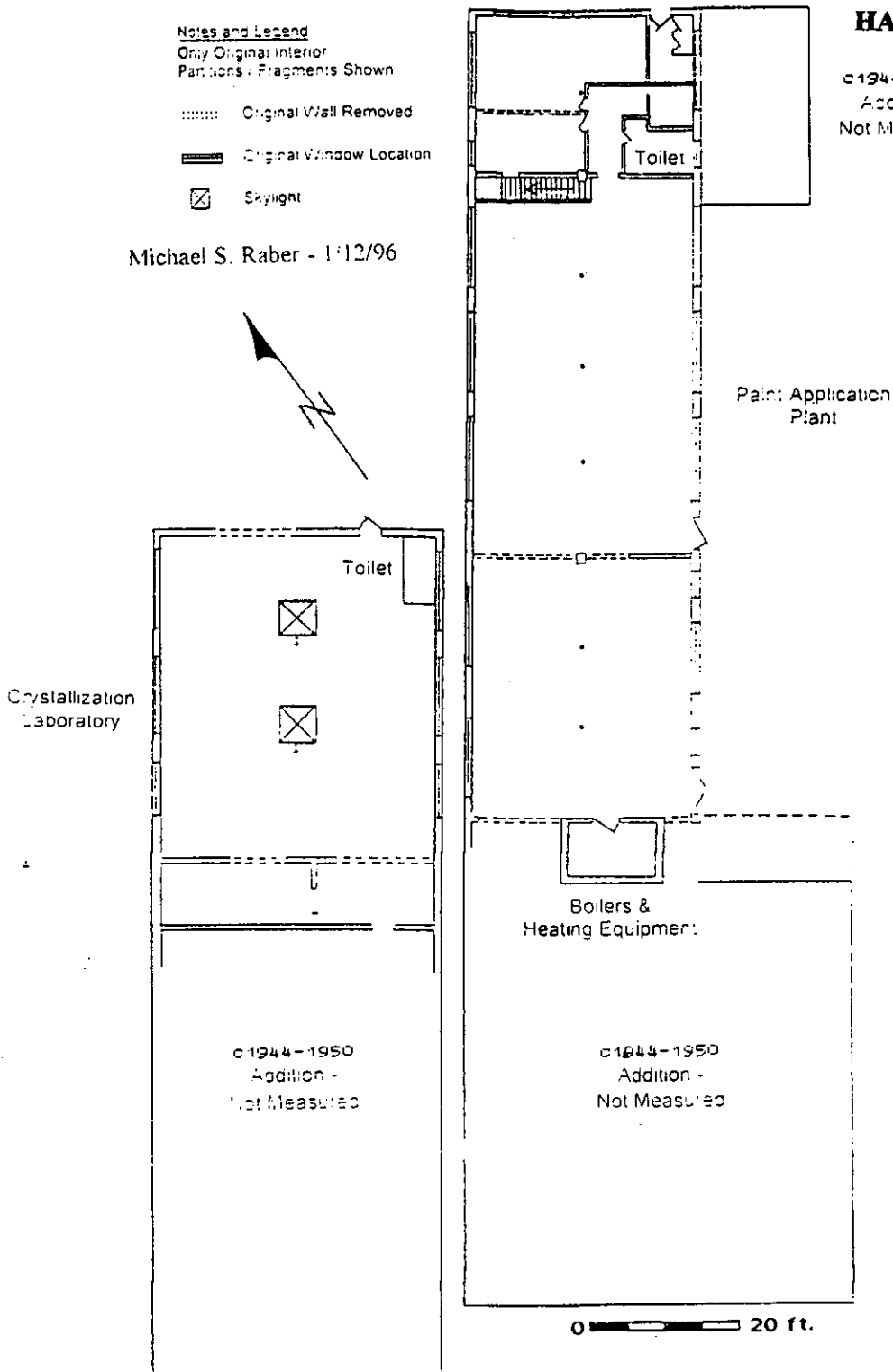
**Notes and Legend**

Only Original Interior  
Partitions - Fragments Shown

-  Original Wall Removed
-  Original Window Location
-  Skylight

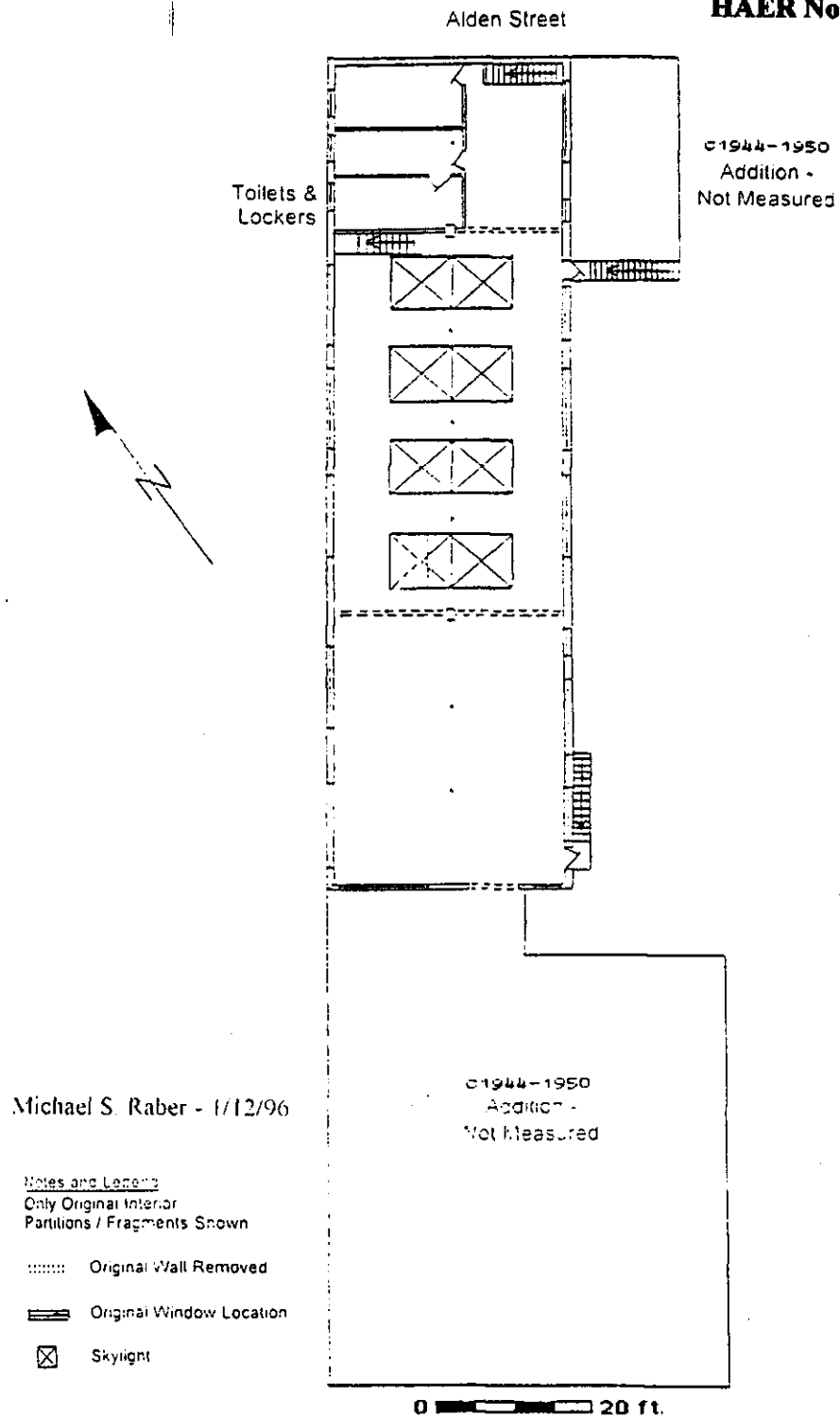
Michael S. Raber - 1/12/96

c1944-1950  
Addition -  
Not Measured



**Measured Sketch of Existing Conditions on the Ground Floors of the Former Paint Application Building and Radium Crystallization Laboratory**

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Michael S. Raber - 1/12/96

**Measured Sketch of Existing Conditions on the Second Floor of the Former Paint  
Application Building**